GRACE COMMUNION INTERNATIONAL

Living and Sharing the Gospel

"They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord" (2 Thess. 1:9).

What Is "Hell"?

What does Grace Communion International understand about the ultimate fate of the unregenerate dead? Are the wicked destroyed in the judgment, do they burn in hell eternally, or does some other punishment await them?

The church traditionally taught that those who deliberately reject salvation would eventually be thrown into the fires of hell. They would then perish – their souls would be destroyed and they would return to eternal unconsciousness. In more recent years, the church has come to the understanding that Scripture is somewhat vague about the details of what happens to the unregenerate at death. Accordingly, the church does not make one's belief about the nature of hell a test of fellowship or a point of contention with other Christians. The church recognizes that a particular view of hell is not essential to salvation.

What we can be sure of is what Scripture clearly teaches. In essence, Jesus will return to judge the world. The dead in Christ – those who are found in allegiance to him – will live with God in joy and glory forever. Those who are found to be his enemies will be destroyed and cut off from him forever. What exactly does "destroyed and cut off from him" mean? We can't know for sure in this life, except that it is something terrifying, and it is reserved for his enemies.

Are those who have deliberately rejected salvation – "the lost" – conscious or unconscious until the resurrection? What, specifically, happens to them in the final judgment? These are questions about which Scripture is ambiguous. Biblical passages that refer to the ultimate fate of the wicked can be interpreted in several ways. The whole truth about the nature of hell is probably impossible to describe adequately in concepts humans are capable of comprehending. What

we do know is that the lost wicked are in the hands of God, who will deal with them in justice and wisdom.

Here are some Scriptural examples that show the difficulty in knowing in some final sense what the fate of the wicked might be. Ironically, some of the Scriptures usually quoted to demonstrate an ever-burning hell-fire do not support this idea in any clear-cut way.

For instance, 2 Peter 2:4-6 speaks of the evil as being burned to ashes. If this is an example of what happens to the ungodly, then it indicates they will be burned up and cease to exist, rather than burn eternally.

Jude 6 speaks of the evil as suffering "the punishment of eternal fire." Does this mean the wicked burn eternally in hell-fire? If so, why does Jude say a few verses later that wandering in the "blackest darkness" of the universe "has been reserved" as a punishment for the wicked forever (verse 13)? Which is the punishment of the wicked – black darkness or blazing fire?

Revelation 14:9 says the evil will be "tormented with burning sulfur." If we take this statement literally, it seems to indicate a burning in hell. However, the context continues by saying that the "*smoke* of their torment rises for ever and ever" (verse 11). If only the smoke of the evil is left, then perhaps we should presume they would have been burned up. A further problem is that the smoke of the destruction of Babylon also "goes up for ever and ever" (Revelation 19:3). Are the stones of the city to burn forever as well? Finally, we have to ask whether Revelation is using graphic symbols to make a theological statement or whether we should understand such material in a strictly literal sense.

In Matthew 25:41 the evil are told to depart "into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." If this is to be taken literally, then what is the purpose of throwing the evil spirits into this fire? Spirit beings do not burn or suffer in fire.

The Old Testament uses 50 different Hebrew words to describe the fate of the wicked, and in all cases these words signify a sense of destruction. The New Testament describes hell in several ways: as a condition of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:12, 13:42); as destruction and a permanent separation from God (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9; 2 Peter 3:7); as a lake of fire and outer darkness (Jude 7, 13); as a situation of final judgment (Matthew 25:41-46; Revelation 20:10-15). While these are symbols of the punishment of the enemies

of God, we should not forget that the reality will be much worse than these symbols can convey.

The story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 is sometimes used to explain what the punishment of the wicked is to be. In the story, the wicked (represented by the rich man) are separated from God by a "great chasm" and suffer agony in a fire. The righteous (represented by Lazarus), by contrast, are with the faithful Abraham and enjoy a close relationship with God. Shall we take these statements literally or symbolically?

It would be odd to picture Lazarus literally sitting in "Abraham's bosom," as the King James translates the phrase, and catches the Greek metaphor correctly. The rich man would hardly be talking if he were in the throes of an excruciating agony while burning in a fire. Yet, if we demand that the rich man literally be in a burning fire, then we should also demand that Lazarus should be literally sitting in Abraham's bosom—and that humans can carry on a normal conversation while undergoing burning. The point is, we should be careful about taking all the details of the story such as bosom, chasm and flame in a literal sense.

Analyzing the examples cited above as a group, it's clear there is a difficulty in trying to understand in a specific way what "eternal punishment" really is. If we demand that each of these verses is describing the literal punishment of the unregenerate wicked, then we are faced with a hopeless jumble of confusion. However, if we see all these statements as "metaphors of damnation" – as symbolic ways of expressing a punishment to befall the unregenerate wicked that we would want to avoid at all costs, then the passages make sense. We are on safer ground if we allow the biblical descriptions of condemnation to be metaphors that tell us the wicked will be punished by God.

True, we are left without knowing exactly what that punishment might be. We may be uncertain as to how God's enemies are "destroyed and cut off from him," but we know their punishment is dreadful and terrifying. Even if the punishment were simply to be told by God that one was going to die and cease to exist *forever* – wouldn't that be horrifying enough?

Those interested in seeing some of the different explanations Christian teachers give for how "eternal judgment" might be carried out, can read a book that describes four different views of the fate of the wicked. The title is *Four*

Views on Hell, edited by William Crockett and published by Zondervan. The book is in print and can be ordered through local bookstores.

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